

Nonformal learning approaches and the professional development of teachers in higher education

Yaw Owusu-Agyeman

Introduction

Recent development in workplace environments has shown that there is a shift in focus from the traditional formal learning modes to other forms of learning such as career mentoring and job shadowing (Bildnerback, 2023). Likewise, employers are expected to support the professional development of staff (Antonopoulou *et al.*, 2021) to cope with the complex digital work environment through diverse ways of learning especially in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Pischetola, 2022). Again, HEIs serve as important spaces for the production, dissemination, and transfer of productive knowledge, innovation, and technology in economies through formal, nonformal, and informal learning modes. Nonformal learning explains planned learning activities that are sponsored by institutions but are not related to the formal curricula or educational projects (Caldana *et al.*, 2023). The difference between formal and nonformal learning is that while nonformal learning emphasizes sponsored programs that do not lead to formal qualifications, formal learning involves learning that takes place in an organized and structured setting which leads to the award of a qualification by way of a certificate (Caldana *et al.*, 2023).

In the context of the current study, nonformal learning explains a set of university-arranged programs for teachers that:

- are situated within a learning setting to enable them to acquire knowledge in the areas of teaching, research, and engaged scholarship; and
- do not lead to formal qualifications.

While a prior study has shown that institutions invest heavily in the training and development of employees, for instance, through informal learning approaches (Joseph and Rajan, 2022), very few studies have attempted to examine how teachers could advance their professional practice through professional development programs (PDPs) that use nonformal learning approaches. To address this knowledge gap, the current study sought answers to the research questions: How can nonformal learning approaches be used to facilitate professional development programs and to enhance the professional practice of teachers in HEIs? Consequently, the current study examined how teachers could advance their knowledge and skills through PDPs that are developed based on nonformal learning approaches.

Methodology

The empirical study was developed using a qualitative research approach which focused on gathering the perspectives and experiences of teachers concerning how nonformal

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learning could serve as a tool to equip them to acquire knowledge for their current and future professional practice. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to gather data from participants who were made up of 9 females and 19 males. Semistructured interviews of a duration between 45–60 minutes were administered to gather relevant data from the participants. Sample research questions were:

RQ1. What nonformal PDPs have been designed by the university to help you develop your professional knowledge?

RQ2. Do the different training you receive through nonformal PDPs provide you with adequate knowledge to perform your work?

The data gathered from participants were examined using thematic analysis to generate themes. To determine the best codes that represent the views of participants, codes that appeared at least ten times or more were highlighted. To ensure credibility of the datasets, the author conducted member checking, used follow-up questions, and had prolonged engagement with participants.

Findings

The four themes that emerged from the narrative data analyzed were:

1. developing teacher professional practice through diverse nonformal learning arrangements;
2. challenges associated with PDPs that are designed using nonformal learning arrangements;
3. teacher rationale for participating in PDPs that follow nonformal learning arrangements; and
4. the role of leadership in professional development.

Developing teacher professional practice through diverse nonformal learning arrangements. The development of staff through nonformal could take diverse forms within and outside the university environment. A participant explained that:

I have attended training at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) where I was taught various delivery and assessment methods through the online learning platform. I have also attended other training programs which introduced me to the values and cultures of the university [Maghiel].

On her part, Lindiwe explained that “I have attended workshops, seminars, conferences, and technical boot camps that were designed to enable me to develop my research and teaching skills.” The study also revealed that some PDPs are organized online for teachers, “we have a good number of programs that are offered by the Human Resource Department through online learning modes” [Adelheid]. The feedback from participants revealed how PDPs are organized by way of nonformal learning activities at the departments and institutional level for teachers.

Teacher rationale for participating in PDPs that follow nonformal learning arrangements. For some participants, their purpose for participating in nonformal learning programs was to equip them with new knowledge to perform their jobs:

Our roles as lecturers continue to evolve and so the training workshops that are organized by CTL and other departments are important for our research and teaching activities [Amogelang].

Similarly, Friedrich noted that “I applied to the university’s mentoring program because I believed it would help me to improve my research skills. The program is very flexible and I can easily transfer the knowledge I gain to the learning environment.” The feedback from Amogelang and Friedrich shows that teachers who participate in nonformal learning

programs have diverse reasons for enrolling in such PDPs including the development of teaching and research skills, the situatedness of learning, and their ability to transfer the knowledge they acquire to the learning setting.

Challenges associated with PDPs that are designed using nonformal learning arrangements.

Other participants also shared their experiences concerning the challenges associated with some PDPs that are organized using informal learning approaches:

Although I have found the short courses to be very useful, I think that there are some challenges.

For instance, some of the training programs are not specifically designed for lecturers in different departments. I hope that different training programs could be organized to suit the peculiar knowledge needs of teachers in different departments [Kaya].

Feedback from Kaya shows that PDPs are often organized at the institutional level without taking into the specific needs of an area or department.

The role of leadership in professional development. Focusing on the role of leadership in teacher professional development, Mulalo noted that:

My head of department always requests us to submit our professional training needs each year for discussion and approval [...] and she also encourages us especially young teachers to attend conferences within and outside the university.

The submission by Mulalo further reveals the significance of the role of leadership in supporting the professional development of teachers at the university using nonformal PDPs.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings of the current study show that teachers could develop their professional practice through diverse nonformal learning arrangements within and outside the university setting. However, to achieve maximum benefits of the nonformal learning arrangements, academic faculties, and departments need to organize PDPs that meet the unique knowledge and skills needs of teachers. Particularly, brainstorming sessions, retreats, conferences, and technical boot camps serve as tools that could promote knowledge sharing, professional networks, and the development of social relationships among teachers. Second, as HEIs continue to promote technology-mediated learning activities, the use of online learning programs has become an important learning mode. What this also means is that academic leaders at the faculty and department levels would have to:

- develop innovative PDPs that could be organized through online modes;
- support the development of early career teachers who would require mentorship and other nonformal PDPs to advance their professional practice; and
- explore collaborative and interdisciplinary activities within and outside the university to support the professional development of teachers.

Conclusion

The central issue explored in the current study was how PDPs could be facilitated using nonformal learning approaches to enhance the current and future professional practice of teachers in a South African University. This study concludes that using nonformal learning approaches to support the development of the professional practice of teachers in HEIs through PDPs is highly relevant. Although there are challenges to using informal learning approaches, teachers are keen to enroll in these programs because the programs are often situated in the learning context, and they can easily transfer the knowledge they acquire to

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the work setting while they also learn the values and academic cultures of the university. Lastly, academic leaders in HEIs should play important roles in promoting the use of nonformal learning approaches to support the professional development of teachers. Future research could focus on how nonformal learning approaches used in PDPs could be evaluated and improved.

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